Conceptualising the Unique Contribution of Sport to Sport for Development

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The purpose of this conceptual work is to build a theoretical framework addressing the unique contribution of sport in Sport for Development (SFD). Practitioners and academicians in SFD have argued that sport provides a useful context for the accomplishment of community and individual development (Cohen & Welty Peachey, 2015; Sherry, 2010). However, little is known as to the unique aspects sport may bring to the development process, as distinct from other development engines. While SFD scholars have continuously endeavored to explain the contribution of sport to SFD (Levermore, 2011), there has been a scarcity of research on practitioners’ conceptualizations (Spaaij et al., 2017). Accordingly, this conceptual work is grounded in two preceding empirical studies with leading SFD academicians and practitioners whom engaged in a conceptual mapping process, whereby they generated and categorized ideas of the unique contribution of sport to SFD.

Thirty-one academicians and 35 practitioners took part in each study respectively. Conceptual mapping is a participatory group idea mapping tool, designed to collect qualitative data and analyze them quantitatively (Kane & Trochim, 2007). We chose this approach to identify the two participant groups’ shared perceptions, ultimately integrating their perceptions to theorize the contribution of sport (Jackson & Trochim, 2002). Both groups were invited to an online platform through which participants were involved in a two-step process of data collection. Using an online platform allowed us to reach across a broad spectrum of academicians and practitioners from various locations and obtain a global perspective. Each group performed brainstorming to generate statements on the unique contribution of sport, and grouping, sorting, and rating to categorize and evaluate the generated statements. The results were analyzed with a hierarchical cluster analysis that developed a cluster map for each group representing a participant-driven visual depiction of ideas.

The results from the academicians study presented five thematic clusters: (a) connecting people, (b) health, (c) collaboration and engagement, (d) social issues, and (e) hook. The interim results from the practitioner study presented six thematic clusters: (a) personal development; (b) connecting people; (c) attitudinal change; (d) sport as hook; (e) sport as delivery tool, and (f) health outcomes.

Although previous research has identified a disconnect between theory and practice of SFD, we found that the two groups – academics and practitioners – hold very similar conceptual understandings of the contribution of sport to SFD. We will provide an overview of our conceptual framework (currently in development) of these combined results during our presentation.

What is interesting to note, and will be discussed in more detail within our presentation, is that neither group adequately addressed the question – what is the unique contribution of sport to SFD? Rather, both groups focused more on the processes of SFD (e.g., hook, connecting people) and the outcomes of SFD (e.g., health, attitudinal change). These interim outcomes have highlighted the ongoing challenge for the SFD field to answer “why is sport unique?” and suggest that future theorizing and research may need to focus on sport as simply one tool of many in the development toolbox.